

0-0-1 The Gate Guardian

Future



“Yeah, yeah,” the merchant snarks, “This’ll easily see a squirrel at 12,000 yards, *no problem!*”

“This thing’s a piece of junk!” I shout, opening my *good* eye and analyzing the thing. My Æ-12 processor picks up a smudged off bar code, *something-9142*, this thing was manufactured nearly 80 years ago, “This thing is ancient, don’t you have anything newer?”

“If I had anything newer, it would’ve been sold!” he shakes the scope around, trying to make me lose clear sight of it. The crowds of people are rushing by behind me on the market, someone bumps into me, lightly snagging my back pocket for a wallet, which I keep in my breast pocket for this exact reason.

I snatch the scope from him, “Fine! I’ll buy it, you cheapskate. What’s it gonna cost me?”

He snatches it back, “I’ll let it go for 3,000 credits?”

“Credits?!” I cry out, “What happened to dollars? Don’t tell me this is black market stuff!”

“So what if it is?” he grabs my coat and pulls me close, “Dollars are tracked, and besides, you’re not goin’ to find something of this caliber anywhere else, this is military surplus, ya’know.”

“Fine,” I cave, reaching into my breast pocket and pulling out my wallet, “Take your damn credits, 2,600 and I’ll consider not reporting it.”

“2,800,” he hackles.

“2,650,” I dangle my payment card, “And I’ll *consider* not reporting it.”

His face wrinkles in disgust, snatching my card and inserting it into an *illegal* payment reader. The light flashes green and tosses the card back to me. “What are you even doing that requires 12,000 yards?”

“None of you’re busy-ness,” I take the scope, holding it to my *bad* eye, switching it on, the image zooms in and stabilizes on something: a pimple on a cook’s sweaty forehead over at the Chinese food truck all the way on the other side of Freemont. Distance: 1,500 yards. “This’ll do,” I say to myself. I turn back to the merchant, “Don’t spend all the credits at once.”

I stuff the scope in my coat pocket and start on my merry way, that was almost all my credits I had saved up. I was expecting it to be in dollars, good ‘ol digital cash. Ever since Ameria swooped in to save the crippled European economy, the Euro crashed and if you had a physical coin, it belonged to a museum. Of course, that’s what dear ‘ol Greg says, I definitely wasn’t alive 120 years ago to see it happen.

Geez, I hope that credit drain was worth it. I start a call with my Æ-12, trying to contact my homie, Cynthia. That stupid ringtone the Æ-12 came with start ringing in my ear. That ringtone is by far the worst thing about this implant, and I needed one bad, but the shiny Æ-13 wasn’t due for another 2 months. Who in their right mind puts binaural ringtones on something like this anyways?

A hottie walks by, distracting me while the phone answers. His jaw looks like it’s a titanium implant- damn that’s good-looking. Cynth’s voice starts chattering in my head, “Hell-o?!”

“Sorry, C,” I answer with my thought, “He’s- I mean, did you get your end of the deal?”

“Oh, yeah, I got the deets,” she laughs. She doesn’t have to worry about leaking her thoughts over the phone, but since my implant is directly wired to language processing, I have to stay careful, “I found a nice guy who full-times at the Foundation.”

“You didn’t bone him, did you? He could have some *unnatural* hazard, given his job,” I say, “Like, what was it? 13-63?”

“No, just a nice kiss on the cheek, and he was ready to talk,” she giggles.

“Let’s meet up with the others, and we can discuss stuff in person.” I’m a little hungry, but that Chinese truck is all the way down Fremont. This side of the road are street merchants, and I’d rather not spend all that time walking. *And* I ate my last protein bar earlier, so I guess I have no choice.

I join the crowd and keep my head low. Lots of police sitting around, but whether or not they’d do something is a coin toss. On one hand, you’ll that new guy who’s all, ‘by the book!’ and on the other, you’ll have the sellout, and I guess on a third hand, you’ll have that old guy who doesn’t care; three hands aren’t common, but that’s also a bad analogy.

The street is always busy, but I make my way. I get in line for the food truck and the guy’s handing out Jianbing for a good price. My good eye sees heat signatures of a few people in the truck, cooks working tirelessly to get some dollars. They work quickly enough and in a few minutes, I get up. “*Yige qing*,” I say, pulling out my payment chip and tapping it against the reader, giving up the required 13 dollars.

The cashier shouts at the cooks, and they pass around the ingredients, eventually making it's way to my hands. I grab it from the guy and it's hot, fresh off the stove. I'm famished, I've been searching all day for that scope and haven't eaten since this morning.

I take a bite, walking back into the crowd. I should catch a cab, then a bus to try and get to the next city over and meet up with the rest of the crew. This job is promising 7,000 dollars and 14,000 credits for information on the subject of the Foundation's greatest historical embarrassments. It's a government censored story that run's in my family: the mighty Torwächter. I've heard it a thousand times.

I finish up the Jianbing and get to the curb. This part of Freemont actually connects to the bridge and road system. Cars, motorbikes, expensive hovervehicles, you'll see everything on the road these days. The bridge up above is vibrating from all the high-speed traffic, sounding out a constant, annoying hum.

My arm holds out, waving for a cab that's decent enough to pick up a low value looking customer like me. I'm not wearing anything fancy, just slacks and a coat; they'll probably think I'm homeless by the look. But one does stop for me, and it's a rundown, rusted yellow car. I open the door, and the unpleasant stench from the cushions in the back makes me second guess the cab, but I get in anyways.

“Where to?” he says, in Jermaine, I think. My left ear, the side with the Æ-12, the chip will auto-translate, but my right ear is unaffected. It was jarring at first, but I got used to it.

“I need to hit up the expressway, so take me to the bus station that’ll take me there,” I respond, “What’s your rate?”

“5 dollars per kilometer,” he says. It’s always more money for the life of a near-vagabond such as myself, “You got some major bags under your eyes, you sure you don’t want to go to a hotel?”

“Just drive,” I say, but he’s right, I haven’t slept right in 2 days, but I’ll catch some shuteye on the bus, it’s a long ride.

Cynthia is waiting for me outside the meeting place. Thankfully she's wearing some actual clothes this time, something that covers her chest and neck, in black. "Charlie!" she shouts, calling me by my middle name.

"Cynthia, is everyone inside?" I ask, my good eye being shut off by some EM interference. Every time we have a meeting on this job, they jam as many electronics as possible. My bad eye is starting to get dry, the rest on the bus wasn't enough.

"No, just the boss," she opens the door for me, and we walk inside. It's just the backroom to the laundromat the boss runs. I'm for certain he's laundering credits through this place, but who cares?

The lights are on, shining on a table, I see the boss and a teenager wearing the uniform to the place. The teen is eating a sandwich. The door closes, cutting me off from the sunlight. "Lunch break's over Jenine," The boss says.

"But sir, I get 30 minutes since I'm on an 8-hour shift today," she retorts. She's right though.

The boss rolls his green eyes, "Then eat in the- just-" he facepalms because he's been in hot water before about breaking the law. "Put in your earbuds and don't pay attention."

"Alright, Mr. Masson," she says, looking back at us. Just puts in some wires and I can hear the music she's turned up. It's an American boyband that's been popular, I think.

"I got the scope, cost me 2,700 credits," I say, opening one of my coat flaps to show him, "12,000 yards, just like you asked for."

Cynthia smiles, “And I got the exact location of the Foundation’s facility in Turk.”

“How *exactly* did you manage that?” Mr. Masson asks, skeptical.

“Oh, I found a high *enough* ranking Foundation guard,” he giggles, “Kissed on the cheek after more than a few drinks, and he was ready to talk all about it.”

“And you got the location in Turk?” he raises his brow.

“Well, a little truth-juice never hurt anyone,” he says, “The guy said the exact long-lat of the facility and the target shouldn’t be too far, and it’s not like it’s invisible either, right, Charlie?”

“Story has it as a silver man, about the height of 2 Jermaine clock towers,” I say, “That’s all the story says though.”

“Charlie, I want you to get some rest before you guys go to Turk,” he tells me. The teenager sneezes and closes her lunchbox.

“I’m fine, I sleep when I’m tired, and I’m not-”

I look over to see Cynthia mouthing the words, “I’ll sneak her some Trazzies.”

“I’m fine! Really!” I raise my voice.

“You look like you have black eyes,” he persists.

The teenager stands up and says loudly, “I’m going back to work, Mr. Masson!” She clearly can’t hear herself. She walks out and closes the door behind her.

“Where’d you even find her?” I ask sarcastically, “Is she saving up for a car or somethin’?”

“She’s part-timing after school to save up for concert tickets,” he replies, “She’s a hard worker.”



I take the scope and slide it on the table, "It's the best I could find, the seller claims it's military surplus."

"From what era?" he picks it up, inspecting it closely.

"It's new enough to be digital, and it has image stabilization," I explain.

"Full-spectrum?" he asks.

"Didn't check," I say, "You gonna cover it?"

"If you don't want to keep it," he laughs, setting it back on the table, "Somebody like you could use to see 12,000 yards."

"I don't sling like that anymore and you know it," I point my finger at him. The teenager walks back in again, pausing in the doorway, looking at my confrontation.

"Oh, I forgot the- the key to the register," she rushes real fast and grabs a set of keys that was left on the table, before rushing back out. She's not an idiot, and probably understands the laundromat is a money-laundering scheme. This is one of the few places that still accept Euro. Credits buy Euro, Euro trades in for Dollars and Credits.

"She's a good employee," I say, retracting my finger, "You pay her well?"

"2 above minimum," he replies, "She's good with the money register."

"Well," Cynthia interrupts, reaching over past me to put a piece of paper on the table, "The, uh, coordinates."

"Really, where did you find a guy that knew this?" he's still skeptical of the information.

“Oh, you can find plenty of Foundations employees at bars,” she explains, placing her finger on her cheek, “They’re actually hiring part-time, I was thinking of applying, maybe getting close to 73.”

I twitch my head at her proposition, “You realize they hire part-time because people die left and right, right?” I turn my head, but I’m barely able to make out fine details with my bad eye; everything’s blurry from exhaustion. I should have some eye drops at Cynthia’s place.

“It’d be *fun* though!” she squeals.

“Alright, you two go home,” Mr. Masson interjects us, “I’ll pass it onto the client. Get some rest, I can’t have a restless slinger.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I say, grabbing Cynthia, “Cynth, I’m crashing at your place.” I push the door open and pull my friend along to the outside. My good eye comes back online and the whole Æ-12 system boots up.

Cynthia catches up to me and gets right beside me. “My bike’s over here, ya’know.”

“Hey, do you still have my eye drops and medicine?” I ask, “I left some in your fridge.”

“I think so, it might be old by now though,” she responds, tugging my coat in the direction of her motorbike, “When was the last time you got a good night’s sleep?”

“‘Good’ night’s sleep?” I laugh at the proposition, “I even don’t think I slept in the womb. I manage to get a little shuteye on the bus over here.”

“A little?” She scoffs. I see her bike and we walk over to it. She gets in front and I mount in the back. “How much is a little?”

“9 minutes and 34 seconds,” I quote. She turns the key, but the bike is silent. It’s electric, so there are no pistons making the constant explosions. It’s fast too, but she knows I get nauseous at high speed.

We start on our way, her apartment’s about 10 minutes out from here, and she knows the roads like the human psyche that she exploits on the reg. “9 minutes isn’t enough, Charlie,” she says, the wind picks up a little obscuring her voice.



The door closes to the apartment and it's almost exactly like it was last time I was here a few months ago. That same 'ol couch with the spring support beneath the cushions. I've spent too many nights on that couch to know that it'll make wake up with the feeling one of your vertebrae is out of place. Lots of memories on that couch, but I really hope she'll replace it.

"I'll go get you a pillow and blanket," she says, "You can look in the fridge to see if your stuff is still in there." She hangs up her keys on one of the holders magnetized to the side of the fridge and walks off into her bedroom.

I go to the fridge, opening it up and seeing some actual groceries. I'm on the move so much, I barely know what a carton of milk looks like, much less any brand or even how much one costs. "Do you really drink enough milk to buy a whole gallon?" I shout across the apartment, "Doesn't it expire in a week or two?"

"I love me some damn milk!" she shouts back, coming back out with a pillow and blanket in hand. My vision is disorienting, my bad eye is dry and blurry, but with my good eye, I manage to see my stuff in the fridge door: my eye drops and an anti-dream medicine I buy on the black market for when I need to knock out for 8 hours. I unscrew my eye drops and put them in both eyes. My good eye also gets dry since there's ceramic on flesh and there's not much in terms of excretion in there.

I blink a few times to get the drops all around and feel a little relief. The other is a vial with an injectable anti-dream. I'm sure I left a bag of needles here too... and yup, it's in the butter compartment in the fridge, only no butter. "I'm gonna do my drugs in the bathroom," I grab the vial and the bag of needles, going to the bathroom. This place is kind of dirty, I mean, it's clean enough, but she has something about keeping the bathroom pristine clean.

I close the door behind me and the room has a faint smell of cleaning agent. I pull out a needle from the bag and slide into the vial, extracting about the 1/10 milliliter required for me. I pull down my shirt just enough and continue to inject the medicine into my upper breast. It'll kick in a few minutes.

I take a nice good look at myself in the mirror. I do look like I have black eyes, aside from my literally black metal eye. My hair's a little long too, I could use to cut a few inches off. One of these days, I should take a spa day and clean myself up.

I feel the anti-dream medicine kick in. My mind becomes foggy, and I should probably go to sleep before my lobes completely shut down. I open the door again and close it behind me, seeing Cynthia with a glass of milk. If it's for me, she most definitely has snuck a sleeping pill in there.

"I poured you a glass," she covers her mouth and giggles, "I already drank up mine!"

"Of course you did," I remark, "You slipped a trazzy in there didn't you?"

"Look, if you're not going to drink it, I will," she gets defensive, snatching the glass of milk and cradles it.

“Go ahead and drink your own medicine,” I say, plopping down on the couch, “You really should consider getting a new couch.”

She scoffs, chugging the milk in one go, all the way. A little bit of milk drips from the side of her lips and continues to rinse out the cup in the sink. My brain starts shutting down and I close my eyes, drifting off. But no dreams, no terrible things for me to see.

Almost without delay, I open my eyes back up and look around, reorienting myself in the real world. I see the time in my good eye, I slept for about 6 hours, a little less than usual, but it'll have to be good enough. The med is expensive, illegal, and highly effective.

I start lightly slapping myself repeatedly to fully wake up, eventually sitting up and taking in a deep breath. There's an artificial window on the wall next to the bathroom door. There's nothing but bathroom behind that wall, but she usually has it set to some painting she ripped off from the 1900s. I've even seen a landscape for Hister himself.

I stand up, stretching my sore back. My back definitely doesn't hurt as much as I thought it would. My bad eye isn't blurry or dry anymore, but my whole face hurts like someone punched me with all their might, and the bruise is starting to reveal itself.

Milk actually sounds pretty good right now, so I make my way to the fridge, pulling out the gallon and a glass from the cupboard. I watch the white liquid flow down into the glass, splashing on the sides and swirling and eventually settling down in a collection of white cow's milk.

I take a swig and think to myself, *Damn, this is good.* No doubt Cynth is still asleep, it's about 5 in the morning, and I don't even think the sun is up. I keep drinking the milk and lean on the counter, trying to relax, my heart rate is up. I have no idea what my brain sees when I'm asleep with the anti-dream, but I know it's not any good. The glass is empty, and I'm left looking at the bottom of a glass with a film of milk dripping to the lowest point of the cup. It's almost hypnotizing.

I set the glass down and ping my bank accounts and check on my funds. Still there, but I'm running low, I should pick up a job for dollars soon, I'm running low enough where my current lifestyle might be affected. What to do, though, what to do? I'll have to pay a visit to a nearby bounty club to look for high paying stuff.

I go to rinse out my cup and I realize and get a whiff of my scent. I smell like sweat and oil. Maybe I should take a shower? But then my clothes are just as dirty too. Geez, have I been smelling like this all this time? I'm going to go stop by a clothing store and get something to eat.

I walk out with a new set of undergarments, pants, shirt in a shopping bag. This place happened to carry my exact size and brand of jeans I like. People would turn away and walk through the other aisle rather than to be near me. Do I really look that bad, or smell that bad? Sure I might look a little rough; I have a tough-guy looking coat and I got a few tears and holes in my clothes, but it's not like I have a crazy piercing or scars or, heaven forbid, a gaudy face tattoo. Maybe it's just the smell, I do smell pretty bad.

The jeans are almost the exact same, but I'll go back to Cynthia's, there's no way she's still asleep at this time of day with a trizzly. I'll pick up some fast food to bring to her to pay for the night's sleep. She really likes Amerian food, and there's a decent burger place nearby. I hate the grease; like who pairs ground beef with tomato and lettuce? I'm *mostly* vegetarian, like 70% of the time. Rice and potates are my go-to, but bread, beef, and lettuce, in one abomination?

It's not long until I find the place I'm thinking of. The line's outside again, just like last time. Cynth must be lying about it's 'never busy', because every time I stop by, the line's outside. Either way, I find what looks like the end and just stand there, the people inching forward. I start playing some music in my head to pass the time in my left ear.

Then some dickhead steps right in front of me. I'm shocked that people are always like this. I grab his shoulder and say, "I'm in line, get behind me."



He turns and pushes away my hand, “Make me.” I take a step back to recollect myself and put myself in the right distance for what I’m about to do. I wear steel-toe for a reason and this man is about to regret this. I swing up my foot right into his crotch. I feel my boot go all the way and hit his pelvis, and he just drops to his knees, holding his testicles for dear life. I thought I heard a little gasp for air as well.

Someone laughs a little behind me, and the guy falls over, crawling away. That’ll probably be the last time he tries to cut in front of me. I step over him and the line keeps inching along until, after probably an hour of listening to whatever music I could think of, I get to the front and order Cynthia a burger and some fries for me to eat. If Americans know one thing, it’s how to make fries.

Some more time and music pass, and they hand me a paper bag full of food with grease practically dripping from the bottom, it’s disgusting. But I take it and make my way back to her apartment. I should’ve gotten a drink, but oh well to that. There’s not a cloud in the sky right now, and the springtime sun is beating down on me. The coat is a little warm, and there’s not a breeze to cool me down or make me look bad ass while walking.

The thought of getting a gun pops into my head. Not necessarily illegal, but hard to obtain under the imposed rule of America and the bent-over-backwards government of the Statin Empire. If I got caught with one bought with credits, I’d land myself in prison. Although, I’m pretty sure a bad ass katana would be fine bought with credits. Maybe if I were to get one with a hyperbeam edge?

I find her complex amongst the numerous buildings reaching up into the sky. In and up the stairs I go. Everything is painted an ugly brown or green to try and match up with the grass and mountainous rock that once stood around these parts hundreds of years ago. The inside lady knows me and lets me walk right through.

The foyer is full of fake plants and a hologram that constantly repeats the rules and regulations of the building. Holograms are expensive, and I don't see why they decided to splurge on them, although they're everywhere in the big cities. The Freemont down the border almost has none, since it's usually vendors going in and out, they'd rather save their money.

I find the door to be locked, so I bang on it a few times, "C! I got a burger!" I hear her footsteps click-clack on the ground all the way up. I see the light disappear from the peephole in the door, her just making sure it's me.

The door swings open, and she pulls me in by the arm. Closing the door quickly behind me. She's paranoid during the day someone will find her here, so she'll only come in and out at night, "What'd you get me?"

"Food? I don't know," I say, "I said burger and the guy handed me a bag." I hold up the greasy paper bag, and she takes it, looking inside.

"Oh, fries," She exclaims, walking over the counter and pulling out the container with *my* fries. I reach over and snatch them away from her, but she just digs through and pulls out the napkins and eventually the food.

"My fries," I say, sliding a salty, fried potato cut into my mouth. She starts eating her food, pulling out a chair, and sitting down. "I'm going to down to a bounty club and pick up a job."

“Masson is probably going to contact tonight,” she reminds me. Mr. Masson is pretty good about doing things in a timely manner.

“But,” I rebut, “I’m not gettin’ paid yet. Things aren’t cheap.”

Suddenly, Cynth’s phone pings. It’s in her pocket this time. I just stare at her, waiting for her to pull it out of her pocket and look at the message. But she just sits there, biting into her burger, locking eyes with me. And she just takes another bite, and I keep waiting. “Are you not going to answer that?” I finally break down and ask.

“No,” she says, mouth full of food. She just keeps chewing for an excessive amount of time, swallows and takes another bite.

“But-” I try to say, “Your phone rang.”

“I know,” she says again with a mouth full of food. She just sits there, staring me down as she eats. So I take a fry and slide it into my mouth, then another. All this waiting, locked eyes. She finally finishes and crunches all the paper up, stuffing it back into the bag it came in.

“Are you going to answer it now?” I ask, “It’s been like 6 minutes and 41 seconds.”

“I need to wash-”

“Answer the damn phone!” I shout, “Or let me do it!”

She kicks up her leg, pointing it at me to keep me from getting closer. And she just balances on one foot, whilst simultaneously keeping me at a distance and washing her hands from the oil. “It’s probably Masson sending us to Turk,” she remarks, flicking the water from her fingers.

“Then answer it!” I shout out. The suspense is killing me!

Finally, she picks out the phone from the pocket and lowers her leg. “Yeah, it’s just Masson, he sent me a, uh,” she pauses looking closely at the phone, “A green finger-snapping and bird emoji.”



I've been awake for 2 days straight in the back of a truck smuggling us past the borders all the way to Turk, a lawless country that collapsed in the late 2080s. I'm sitting on the passenger's side of the back of a beat-up truck. Cynth is sitting on the driver's side, and there's a third coming with us. His name is Geoff, and we've met before on another job from Masson. He's more machine than man and has got two real good eyes; full-spectrum, 100x zoom, even a low light mode. I know he has some newer model of the Æ chip. Dressed in gigablack clothes, he disappears in the dark and reflects all infrared light. I have to close my good eye just to look at him.

Geoff, if I recall, can hit the bottle cap of a soda from 75 yards single-handed with a pistol. He's good, and he's here for protection if something goes wrong, not that it will; Cynth and I are among the best slingers. You need something, even information, from point A to point B? We'll do it any way you want.

I decided to take a dose of classical music on repeat on my Æ-12. Something about rivers and souls, but it's peaceful and helps clear my racing mind. My bad eye is drying up and I forgot my eye drops yet again. It's the dead of night, and this driver is going at it on the dirt road to get past whatever's left of Turk border patrol. The music is only in my left ear, so I hear every rock flying past us in the right.

I think to myself, *This is one helluva job*. We're collecting information on the Foundation's biggest screw up, and the personal legacy of my family: the Torwächter, the Gate Guardian, the silver man, whatever you want to call it. The driver is going to get us all the way to the outer gate. It won't be unusual, people come to see foundation compounds all the time, this one included, but never once has the exact location been leaked.

The GPS in my *Æ-12* says we're approaching the compound in about an hour. C is dead asleep, and Geoff is in 'rest mode'. Come to think of it, he could be a drone from Anderson's or some other robotics company. That company usually keeps to themselves, but sometimes things get out. Although the other companies do sell drones all the time, for about 2.3 million dollars starting.

"Geoff?" I say, barely above the wind.

His eyes open up and the optics in his eyes recalibrate. "Yes?" he grunts. He's not very social.

"We're arriving in about 43 minutes and 31 seconds," I say, "Tell me something if you would."

"What?"

"Nevermind," I stop myself from asking about whether or not he's a drone, I don't want to get on any bad side he might have, "Do you know anything about Hister's secret weapon he used in World War II?"

"I know that it's the thing you've been sent here to collect information on. Otherwise, my memory is blank," he says, his voice is static, unemotional. I really think he's a robot from Anderson's. I wonder if there are any real human parts to him.

His head tilts back down and closes his eyes, going back to 'rest mode'. And I'm left with myself in the dark, again, like most of my life. A life with no sleep is pretty dull, despite what you might believe. You're either working until you collapse or you find yourself staring at a brick wall in an alleyway until the sun rises and snaps you out of the exhaustion.

The piano music keeps playing, and I catch myself dozing off, slapping myself as hard as I can to wake back up. The sound wakes up Cynthia, and she lifts her head, looking at me. I get a little taste of blood on my tongue, as I probably just cut myself on my silver tooth. Just another reminder of *that* bad decision.

It's not long that we get to the drop off point. Geoff wakes up and Cynthia comes to cognition. It's about 1:32 in the morning when it's easiest to get in. There's a small haze in the distance. I wonder what kind of containment they're using to keep such a force to be reckoned with. I hop out of the truck. I knock on the window, and the driver lifts his chin to me, pulling out a flask full of alcohol.

I pull open the door and fetch the camouflage for the truck. It should make it look like a boulder, which people tend not to recognize. Geoff locks and loads his pistol. The letters J.A.K.O.B. carefully carved and etched into the black and silver steel housing. My good eye links up to my Æ-12 and draws a line, the trajectory of the bullet if it were fired as long as it's my line of vision. I paid hella extra for that feature.

Cynth and I cover the camouflage over the truck. The fabric is specially designed to look like a rock on all spectra, a special meta-material like Geoff's clothes. We pin down the cloth and, yup, it's a rock.

Geoff goes forward and starts snipping the fence open with his fingers. His bare *damn* fingers. He's a drone, for sure, or at least had robotic arms. Those are fairly common, especially for war vets.

He stretches out the opening to the fence and Cynthia crawls through. I get down on the ground and start my crawl. Haven't done this since I was a kid, crawling through a hole. But I get through, jumping back up to my feet. Lastly, Geoff gets through and holds out his gun.

The satellite blocks out about 26,000 acres, so this compound is huge. There's a fence surrounding the entire place, and then 3 layers of quickbuild walls. Guard towers are scarce though, there's simply not enough manpower to spread out over the world *and* secure this place, it's huge!

We sneak along, and I see no heat signatures. The walls are semi-transparent in that spectrum, and no one is even close to us. Something is a bright spot on my good eye though, and it's in the direction of the haze. It's just a white spot, the temperature is unreadable, but it's through 3 walls of quickbuild. We keep going until we find a door going through the wall.

Locked, of course, Cynthia pulls out her special lock-picking hairpins. She begins to go at it on the lock. "This thing hasn't been changed since 1957 when the war ended," she remarks, "Fantastically clean though."



I shush her, trying to keep her from making any more noise. The lock slides around and the door squeaks as it opens wide enough for us to make it through. Luckily enough there seems to be another door in a line to the center. The bright spot in my vision is even brighter now that there's one less wall in the way. Whatever this thing is, it's extremely hot. My good eye can detect temperatures up to 10,000 degrees. I have no clue what it is they're keeping here.

Cynthia picks open the next door, and I don't see anyone on the other. This place is stretched real thin, I reckon. The door opens, and we walk through into the next area. My good eye sees a dark spot in the shape of a building. That must be the main complex.

The final door opens and the light spot overexposes my good eye, blinding me. I feel a sting in the back of my eye socket, forcing me to cover my eye and take a step back. It's just as bright in my other eye. I pull out that scope I bought just for this.

I look over and see the Foundation's compound. Just a big, square building. A few guard towers standing about. I hold up the scope to my good eye because it can still see clearly at this stage of sleep deprivation.

"Holy shit," I whisper to myself.



There's no silver man here. The figure off in the distance looks like raging flames. Flaming auras reaching out from behind, laddering down in two lanes. And his hands, they're wrapped around something that burning even hotter. It looks like a sword, but the blade is ever-changing. He looks to be guarding a huge archway with a grove on the other side, full of lush trees and grass; like nothing I've ever seen before.

Most petrifying of all, there's no face, and yet I *feel* its gaze. "What do you see?" Cynthia whispers to me, snapping me out of it, "is that like an infinite bonfire?"

"No, it's worse," I say, "So much worse. There's no silver man here, we must've gotten wrong information- Masson and his buyer, they're going to be pissed."

"Silver man?" she asks herself, "My informant never said anything about a silver man, he said it's more like a flaming seraph. Although, he was under truth juice."

"No, the stories in my family say a silver man, silver like the metal- nothing ever said anything about flames," I start going off.

"You've never seen it until now, Charlie," she tries to calm me down, "Thing's get long in translation-"

"My great-grandparents were there! They watched the thing destroy Londen and Ledivberg- they were literally there!" I start getting loud, realizing, and shutting up.

I go back to looking through the scope. Chills travel down my spine as the Torwächter turns his head towards me. My mind flashbacks to my night terrors as a child. Sirens start going off, red lights flashing all about. Do they know we're here? I doubt it. I look back and see Geoff cool as a cucumber.

"Activity levels detected!" sirens repeat over and over. The lights keep flashing, and the sound keeps echoing between the walls surrounding us.

We keep camping out. That *thing* and I are locked in a gaze. For once in my life, I'm actually scared of something. I'm uneasy with this. How do I know what truth and what lies in all these stories? My ancestors watched a silver man obliterate city after city, but here I am looking at a flaming angel guarding a grove of trees.

I switch my scope to the compound. Personnel dressed in white and black start funneling out, brandishing guns of all kinds, like that'll do anything to the Torwächter. They all start lining up and trucks start exiting the compound, equipped with rockets, powerful ones I'm sure.

Geoff remains ready to fire at will and Cynthia begins to slouch on the wall while I just stare at him. "When do I get to look at it?" she cries out.

"Right now," I demand, "I'm sick of this thing staring at me." I hand her the scope and turn and slouch on the wall.

"You said it was looking at you?" she says, "It looks like it's facing off into the distance."

I notice the sky begins to get lighter as the sun rises on the Turk landscape. I start playing that river song in my left ear and try to calm my nerves. "Cynth? What else do you know about this thing?" I ask.

“The guy said that they stay around 10 kilometers away from it and that they stopped running experiments in the 2010s,” she explains, “I tried to bait more out of him, but that’s all he had to say.”

“Geoff, you know anything about it?” I ask him.

“My memory is blank on the subject,” he responds unemotionally.

“Yeah, I’d say a flaming seraph was an accurate description,” she says, “I’ve gotten a feel for the facility, should be enough for Masson’s buyer. This thing is rated for 12,000 yards, right?”

“That’s what the guy said, and the readout for the Torwächter is roughly 12,000, so I guess he’s right,” I reply, thinking about those credits I used to buy the thing.

“That means this whole facility is about 14 miles circular, with the compound located about, uh,” she pauses to look and take a measurement, “about 6 miles from the Gate Guardian.”

“What’s the buyer even going to do with the information?” I ask aloud, just thinking and ranting.

“You know the code, we don’t ask,” she replies, “Here you can have this back and go back to your staring contest.”

The sirens stop and the lights stop flashing, the siren saying, “Activity nonthreatening.”

She tosses me the scope and I lay back down on my stomach, peering back through to the Torwächter. The scope focuses on the target and his head turns back to me. Chills go up and down my spine as his faceless head looks at me.

The sky is blue, signaling we should leave before someone sees us. I get up to my feet and put the scope back in my coat. I start marching back through and Cynth closes the doors. “Aren’t you going to relock the door?”

“No, these ones are permanently locked,” she remarks as we make our way back to the truck.

“Geoff,” I call out, “What do you reckon these walls are for?”

“Spectra-analysis points to them being fire-resistant,” he replies.

“So these are to-” I turn back to the Torwächter’s bright spot on my good eye, “keep an outburst under control. This thing’s a bomb.”

“Possibly,” she says, closing the second door behind us, “I know this thing has been basically inert since they stopped testing.”

“But, the story goes it has a ‘ray of death’, that’s what the story says-” I start getting worked up again, “But this one has a sword.”

“Charlie!” she grabs my shoulder, “You’re out of sleep and you’re being manic. Calm down.”

I stop my rant and try to calm myself, shaking my head in agreement. We get through the last door and crawl through the opening in the gate, Geoff crawling through last. We look back to see him reattaching the cut wires with, again, his bare fingers.

I go ahead and march up to the truck, pulling all the camouflage off and scrunching it up in frustration. This could all be a bust and all that money and time down the drain. I open the door and the driver is woken up by the sudden noise of me shoving the fabric into the foot area of the passenger's side.

Geoff and Cynthia follow up behind me, jumping into the truck bed. I look back at the bright spot, eventually stopping and following them onto the truck. Cynth taps the window a few times, signaling to take us to the nearest big city with an underworld network.

Masson rarely uses the underworld, I use it all the time for contacting clients about credit-paying jobs, Cynthia will occasionally use it too for her specialties. But this marks an exception for Mr. Masson since other networks of communication are constantly monitored, especially by the Foundation and America.

“Stay around here!” I command the driver, “Don’t talk about anything either!”

“Aye, aye, Captain!” he says, taking a drink from his flask, “Got to go get a refill anyways.”

“I’m serious, Mr. Masson doesn’t take too lightly about snitches,” I reiterate. Cynth, Geoff, and I start walking across the street to a sketchy bar and pub that screams *slingers* and has *bounty* and *underwork* basically written on the walls.

I burst through the door, and see the crowd you’d expect to see. My bad eye is having trouble focusing on it being dry and all. I just continue to march through in between the table all the way to the barman standing behind the counter. But before I arrive, I feel a hand grab my buttocks.

I stop in my tracks and slowly turn around to see who it was that is going to get a double serving of bones served on wheat. It’s this fat, bald guy laughing to his friends. There’s a specific part of the ear cartilage that when pinched, causes extreme pain. I know exactly where that part of the ear is.

I pinch this guy’s ear, and he winces in pain, turning to me. I get a good look at his ugly face; a few eyebrow piercings, a lizard tattoo on the opposing side, and a prosthetic eye. “What the hell, bitch-” he remarks, right before I knuckle him on the bridge of his nose. I feel the bone underneath crack, but not break.

I let go, and he stands up, towering over me by more than a few inches, blood dripping from his nostrils. Geoff pulls out his gun, ready to fire, and says, "Threat Identified." The letters J.A.K.O.B. flashing out in front of the whole bar. The line drawn in my eye targets right behind the temple, targeting the inner brain. Geoff is ruthless to be sure.

He looks around at the three of us, Cynthia readying her push knife, and sits back down, turning away and carrying on with his cronies. We all calm down and I continue on my way to the barman. I fish out my underwork token and hold it between my fingers, making sure the barman sees it. "I need a messenger hawk if you wouldn't mind."

He twitches his head to tell me to follow him across the bar to the end, where he pulls out the messenger hawk. It's an older one, but it'll still do. The old ones don't support the encryption and protocols that are mainly used today. These older ones are sometimes tracked and cracked, but I don't have a choice right now.

I insert my token and get my credits payment card ready for the barman. These old ones use a wheel, like phones from the 1900s to dial the 24 digit long disposable contact number. These things are built to be dumb, in contrast to modern tech that surrounds it. No serial numbers, no barcodes, no branding. It's a blank piece of machinery purpose-built for the underwork.

I start moving the wheel back and forth to dial in the number that Mr. Masson gave me before we left. 24 digits are absurdly long on a wheel, but I get to the final digit, and I pick up the speaker and mic. No ringing, you just wait until the other side picks up.



I look over to see Cynth taking a shot and Geoff staring blankly into space. Finally, I hear the voice synthesizer the underwork uses. “What’d you find?” I’m pretty sure it’s Mr. Masson on the other side, but the voice synth makes it impossible to know for sure.

“Well, the thing was on fire, didn’t expect that,” I say.

“You said it was made of silver,” he replies.

“I know that, but either my family was wrong, or we got the wrong target.”

“What else did you find?”

I look over to Cynthia looking out to the crowd. I hope she isn’t drunk already, she can *not* hold her booze. “The target had a sword too, of some kind, also unexpected. The whole facility was an about 14-mile circle, with the main compound full of heavily armed men.”

“A sword?” he questions me.

“And there wasn’t a soul within 6 miles of the thing.”

“Good,” he says, “Stay in town, I’ll give you an update later.” he gives the address of the hotel we’re supposed to stay at. It’s further into the city. Geez, I just hope there’s an Intellavision for me to watch. I didn’t bring my anti-dream, so I’m pulling a third-day-nighter.

“Alright,” I say, “What do we need to do next?”

“I’ll need you to go back and get a layout of the compound,” he tells me.

Some gears grind in my head, “You want us to infiltrate the compound?”

“Yes,” he commands me. I bite my lip; this is more than I signed up for, but I always see the job through.

“Yes, sir,” I say, hanging up.

I walk over to Cynthia and pull her arm to get her off the counter, Geoff stands up and follows us. We walk right past the fat bald guy, and he flinches as we go.

Traffic has picked up on the outside, cars, and hovervehicles rushing by. Cynthia lightly starts slapping her face to sober up a little from the shot. I have no idea what she decided to ingest. Alcohol and I don't mix... at all. Last time I had an encounter with booze, I was having terrors the entire time it was in my system.

I see the driver on the other side of the road, leaning on his beat-up truck, enjoying the damn weather. The sun overhead is hurting my bad eye. The traffic stops for a moment, and we, with some others, cross the road. I look down the roadway and see the big city all the way down. Towering skyscrapers shimmering in the air. I see the road split into bridges down the line too.

We get across and I tell the driver where he needs to take us, to the hotel Mr. Masson has paid for us to stay at while we're in the city. We all mount inside the back of the truck, and we go off down the road.

The skyscrapers get closer and closer. I see the faint holograms glowing in the daylight. Cities aren't usually too bright during the day. You see billboards on every space that isn't a window, advertising anything, and I mean *anything*. Outside the urban areas, life hasn't changed much in the past 100 years. But urban life is for me, it makes me at home.



The driver's sleeping in his car, Cynthia decided to take the bed in the other room. Geoff is laying on the ground behind the couch laying down, *perfectly* still like a corpse... or a drone. Me? I'm sitting on the couch hugging my knees watching a documentary on serial killers. These things fascinate the hell out of people, including me. I actually know one of the people that they were talking about. *Way* back in the day when I was first slinging, I did about anything. I never killed anyone, but I was involved in certain jobs that did. I was young, a teenager who was haunted every night by night terrors.

One day, I did a terrible thing- / didn't do it, but I was directly involved. When I was reeling from shock, I made the decision to limit what I would and wouldn't sling. Not that I could just change professions, I had no other applicable skills, unlike that teenager working at Mr. Masson's laundromat. I was younger than her when I first started slinging, but she's got cash register skills, people skills. I've never even been behind a counter, handling money or what little physical cash actually circulates now.

Anyways, the show follows the murders and a few killers and their arrests, one of them killed themselves rather than to serve his sentence. The person I knew that's featured, I did a job with him moving a shipment of illegal medications, like the anti-dream I take now. Not all of it was illicit drugs, most of them were prescriptions that were smuggled or made for other buyers. The guy was assigned on the job for protection, similar to how Geoff is assigned to protect Cynth and I. That job went well, but he was arrested for killing 9 people, all sling-related.

A knock on the door brings me out of my haze watching the intellavision. I get up and stretch my back. It's a little warm, so I remove my coat and overhang it on the opposing chair next to the IV. I get to the door, opening to find a hotel staff holding a decently sized box. "Hello, I was told to deliver this package to room 91," she says, holding out the box.

Confused, I take it, shaking it around. It's lightweight, feels like clothes. "Uh, thanks," I say, "I guess." She walks off, and I take the box and toss it to the couch. Moving to my coat, I pull out a pocket knife and go to open the box.

Upon opening it up, I find Foundation uniforms. This means I won't be able to wear my pants during the operation, but maybe I can smuggle my coat in. I see a note stuffed into the box as well. I pick it up and it reads, "ACB: remember to bathe before the job." I do have a habit of not showering for days. There's no set routine for me to remember. I'm up 3 or 5 days at a time, and rarely does it occur to me I might smell bad. I should shower now since it's fresh in my mind. A hotel such as this should have hot water.

I made sure to bring some spare clothes on the trip this time, something I often forget to do. I set the stuff back into the box and go to the window. 42nd floor up, and to ruin the view is a ginormous hologram advert back facing the window. A hologram of this size costs millions and thousands to operate. But I disregard the giant ass in the window and go to take a shower, taking one of Cynthia's push knives.

I get the water to a nice warm temperature, and I just stand in the flowing stream a little while to relax and calm my nerves. I'm always so worked up from the lack of sleep. My hair is seriously too long, I'm going to cut it off when I get out. I continue to clean myself, making sure to scrub the stink off.

I get out, drying myself, looking at the foggy mirror. I wipe my hand across the mirror to clear the moisture, but it just fogs back up again. I start pulling my hair back into a tail, making sure there aren't any strands looser than the others. I hold it back with one hand, and take Cynth's push knife in the other, and slice off the excess. A wet clump of hair falls to the ground, and I look at it. *How many times do I do this? When was the last time I went to a hairdresser?*

I continue drying off and get dressed in the clean clothes. My hair is nearly dry and the mirror is clear. I look at myself, seeing my black metal good eye in contrast to my white and blue bad eye. At the time, I thought the black paint job was bad ass. What is it I think about it now? Kind of like a bad tattoo; sure you could get it removed or covered up, but something is stopping you from doing so, some sort of sentiment.

I go back to the main room, seeing blue skies peeking through the window. Day time already.



The driver gets us back to the access point. We cover the truck and Geoff reopens the fence where we first entered. Cynthia reopens the doors, and we get past the second wall, where we start walking to the nearest point to the compound. I see that ever present bright spot on my bad eye. Cynthia got a good layout of the facility and spotted a tunnel leading from the outside to the compound.

We walk in between the third and second wall, passing by a locked door every so often. It took about 47 minutes and 11 seconds to find the tunnel that she mentioned. There's no one here, so Cynthia begins opening the door. It swings open and we walk through. The compound is smaller than I had first imagined. I decided to wear my coat over the Foundation uniform, whilst Cynth and Geoff are fully dawned in the clothing that Mr. Masson provided. Geoff, though, has his gun under his arm to conceal it. Any new metal detector would find the weapon, but this place doesn't seem to be that updated.

I feel the Torwächter looking at me. My nerves are excited, and chills constantly blow into my bones; I don't like it here. Still no one in sight, but there's a double door next to the tunnel entrance. I knock a few times and wait. The door swings open, nearly smacking into me. Someone in a uniform. He starts speaking in Turk, but my Æ-12 translates, "What the hell are you three doing out here?"

"I, erm," I clear my throat, "Perimeter is secure."

He rolls his eyes, turning around and speaking in English, "Why were you checking the perimeter?"

"We were told to, sir," I say.

“And where are your firearms for checking the perimeter?” he asks. His accent is thick and barely understandable.

“We were told to leave them behind,” I repeat. Cynthia is overly quiet, she must be nervous. Geoff barely speaks anyways, he’s level-headed.

“So let me get this straight?” We turn a corner and enter a large room, one side of the room, there’s a big screen with readouts and camera views of all spectra. “You were tricked into walking the entire 70-kilometer circumference *without* protection?”

He turns to the crowd of people wading around the room, doing various things, “Who the *hell* did it this time?”

The room falls silent and everything stops. The man just holds his arms out, waiting for a response. “Well if no one is confessing, then you better hope I assign laps again!” he shouts.

Some of the people inside curse, then get back to work. “Hey!” someone calls out to me, “Lose the jacket, if the director sees you wearing it, it’ll look bad on all of us.”

“Right,” I say, removing my coat, and folding it up and holding it.

“Well?” the guy repeats again.

“Yes?” I say, frozen in anxiety and chills.

“Get to work!” he shouts, turning back to the screen, directed at the gate guardian, “Shit, I can’t stand new people.”

“Give her a break, maybe she’s hearing things,” someone else says. I turn to see Cynthia sitting in one of the chairs already, and Geoff on another table all looking natural.

“Hey, you!” he calls me out again, “Are you hearing stuff?”

“Well-” I try to say.

"If you are, report directly to the Director!" he shouts again.

"I'm just a little on edge," I tell him.

He scoffs, and the girl sitting next to him punches his arm, "Get over it, it's not like this is the worst time you could be assigned to watch."

Someone else chimes in, "Yeah, I wish I could just be assigned to contain that cake one I hear about."

"Yeah, 871," the guy laughs, "Yeah, newbie, come check this out."

Slowly I take step after step to him, I see all sorts of camera views watching all sorts of things. I get behind him and bend over to see what he's looking at, "What is it?"

"It's looking directly at the compound," he says, "it happened yesterday too, but this time he was slowly turning his head, and he's completely locked on the compound."

"Strange," I say, knowing that he's looking at me.

"Take over for me," he says.

"I-," the girl next to him interrupts me.

She turns to him, "Quit trying to get out early. You, just go sit down and wait until you're next."

I go sit down next to Cynthia whose struck up a conversation with someone at the table, talking about some guy Cain. Cynthia is just wanting so bad to meet him, and the girl she's talking to says that apparently, he's actually fairly nice to be around, if not a little creepy. She heard this from some international guards that paid this site a visit.

"When did you guys start?" she asks us.

Cynthia answers first. She knows I'm on edge and not great at people skills in the first place, "We started recently actually."



“Well, this place is kind of a dud when you think about it,” she explains, “No tests are ever run, and aside from that scare yesterday, *nothing* ever happens.”

The door bursts open and that guy that led us in here marches in, gun in hand, but finger off the trigger. “Where are the three I led in here?” he demands to know.

I stand up and pull Cynthia up with me. “Here, sir,” I manage to say. Geoff stands up, arms folded, and ready to pull out his gun.

“Follow me, the director wants a word with you about your doop,” he demands. This is probably a trap, a bad one. We follow him, and he guides us down a series of hallways, covered in various sized doors and panels. We stop at a door labeled ‘Directors Room’. The room opens, and we come face to face with an older man. Round glasses looking at a screen mounted on his desk.

Someone sneaks up behind Geoff and jams two bars into his temples, but he doesn’t flinch, just stands there, frozen. Cynthia gets the bars jammed into her head too, but she falls down in pain, and she’s cuffed by one of the guards.

The door slams shut and the guy holds his gun to the back of my head. The director looks up from his screen and says, “In all my time as director of Site 0, I’ve seen many break-in attempts, but none as bad as this.

“What’s your name?” he asks.

“I go by Charlie,” I say, scared and frozen in fear.

“Why try to break in?” he persists, “Surely you didn’t come here to try and steal the 0-0-1, you’d need an army and a very powerful explosive device.”

"I'm just here-" I stutter, pausing, "To investigate."

I duck down while swing up my leg to get the man in the crotch and dodge any bullets. The gun goes off and barely misses the director. Geoff is frozen in place and I run, letting my instincts kick in. It's fight or flight, and I'm fleeing. I burst through the door and run down the hallway. The walls are partially transparent to my good eye, and I just keep trying to find a way out. A few twists and turns later, I find a set of glass doors leading to the outside, and I burst through the glass, flinging shards everywhere.

I pause to find a way back, but my mind is racing, I can't think clearly. My heart's pounding and I just want to break down and cry, but now's not the time for that.

Sirens and red lights start going off, saying, "Breach!"

Then, everything falls silent for a moment. *Everything*, my heart, the world, my mind. It's serene for a single moment and I hear what seems to be the voice of thousands of people in perfect harmony and synchronization say, "Come to me." I feel a force like a rope start pulling me to the Torwächter. My feet start running by themselves, and it feels I have no control. Real fear and terror strike me down like when I was a child. The brightness of the flaming man overexposes my good eye and I can't look away. My Æ-12 starts frizzing out and shuts down, and my good eye stings from the overexposure.

"You remember me, don't you?" I hear the voice again.

"Yes!" I cry out, tears flowing out my eyes.

"Your ancestors remembered me. I remember them," it says, "I remember all I cast my gaze upon."

I feel like I'm running faster and faster than I could possibly do otherwise. The flaming man grows larger and larger as I come closer. "You've seen me all your life," it says.

"Yes!" I cry out, "Every night, I see you!" My hand is pulled up by some force and it feels I'm being pulled along by a chariot.

Roars of the Foundation's vehicles grow ever louder as they chase me. I hear loud sirens call out, "Don't let her reach 1 kilometer!"

Rapid-fire starts going off, a bullet biting into my left arm that's reaching for something. I see the blood spray and obscures my view for a moment. Suddenly the rain of bullets stops and something explodes, finally stopping me and knocking me to the ground. I tumble and roll and stop shy of a dirt mound that extends out in both directions. A barrier they must've put up.

I roll over to my back and see a truck with a sonic weapon attached to the top. What are they even going to do with that? The screeching of the weapon pierces my ears and it feels like I have a boulder crushing me down. My vision tunnels and all I can think is, *don't make me dream.*



*Where am I?* I think to myself. I look around, something's different. I don't have my good eye or my Æ-12, but I'm not any younger. I'm in a restaurant, a busy one. And there's only one waitress, rushing as fast as she can from table to table.

I look outside the window and see old cars, like *really* old. Not holograms, hovervehicles. There's an old tube IV mounted on the wall with the customers' eyes glued to it.

"Charles!" a woman shouts.

The waitress greets the people with food, "I'm working as fast as I can, Myrtle."

No, it can't be. The waitress is in a red and white uniform, with a fo-corset. I turn to the IV, and see a black and white news reporter, "The Red Army continues their crusade throughout European, experts say that they're going to invade Angland soon, despite public statements from Hister himself saying we're of no interest-"

The ground shakes and half of the restaurant explodes, the patrons turned to dust in a ray of death. I've seen this before. I've seen this many times. It's the silver man from the stories. And that's my ancestor, one of my great-grandmothers, Charlie.

Everyone starts screaming and running away, Charlie is frozen in the gaze of the Torwächter. I look outside the window and see the terrible thing pushing over buildings, and firing his ray of death at anything., in all directions from 90 eyes on its face. Planes appear overhead, the Amerians from the story and their nuclear, world-ending bombs. I've seen this enough times to know every count, every face and thing out of place.

I turn around and the world shifts to a different city. I see Charlie, covered in burns and patches, being lead through a crowd by a Red Army soldier, Charlie's husband Charles. Suddenly the ceiling collapses and bombs start dropping. This time, it's not the Torwächter, it's just the sad realities of war. I turn and see the crowd disappear.

I'm in a room, an apartment, with Charles and Charlie, and some others. Two younger girls and an older woman, all sharing a meal over a glass table. I start to walk and run, but I seem to be going in the opposite direction. "What am I supposed to do?!" I cry out, my voice cracking. I'm so scared. I'm full of terror and fear, my legs barely have the strength to stand.

I see her turn to me, and she disappears. I fall to my knees, crying, waiting for someone to come save me. I look up and see Charlie, standing above me with an outstretched hand. But when I reach, another hand grabs her and holds her tight. I see the fear in her eyes.

Behind me is the silver man; I turn and see *him*. His cold gaze, his ray of death burning down an entire Jermaine city. "Look at me!" I hear Charles say, "You're my top priority!"

Some other soldiers flip over the truck and the engine starts up again. He leads her heroically into the truck, and they drive off, leaving me behind. I start running, and everything fades away into blackness.

The ground gives way and I start falling into the void. I slam into the ground and I see the two. Charles walks away into the blackness, and Charlie holds out her hand for me again. I reach out and grasp her hand firmly. "What am I supposed to do?" I whimper, "It's always haunting me."

"Survive!" I hear her voice whisper before she fades away too.

My eyes open back up to reality. I start screaming in fear, not knowing where I am or what's real. I thrash around, but I'm held back by restraints to a hospital bed. I see a machine, reading out my vitals. My good eye and my *Æ-12* booting back up and recalibrating.

My vision focuses and I come to see the Director from the compound. "I contacted your mother," he says, "She said you've had night terrors for as long as she can remember. This is why you purchase illegal anti-dream medication? So you don't have them?"

"What do you know?" I scoff, my heart pounding and the heart rate monitor going crazy.

"Your heartbeat is irregular, so I suggest you calm down," I see him putting one leg over the other in a chair opposite the room, "I pulled a very extensive check on you-"

"Where's my coat?!" I demand to know. It was a gift from my late father.

"It's in a locker," he replies, "*and if* you care about your friends, they're currently in containment."

"It's part of the job not to be concerned with others," I say, "What did you learn?"

"Well, I know your full name is Agnes Charlie-"

"Agnese," I correct him, "with an *easy*."

"*Agnese* Charlie Brandt, you're a descendant from Charles and Charlie Adamonte, one of the few people to survive an interaction with item 0-0-1 during the second world war.

“*You* started slinging in southern Jermaine and Austian country when you were around 13, officially registering as a P.I., and might I say, you’ve been involved in some very *interesting* jobs,” he says, “Now let me remind you, I’m not a cop, nor are you even wanted in Turk, so once I’ve conducted an independent investigation, I won’t be able to detain you any longer.”

I try to lunge out and attack him, my left arm slipping through the restraints, but when I reach out, I notice my hand is missing. I start screaming, not being able to look away. “What happened!?” I scream.

“During your capture, one of my own decided to open fire, and shot off your hand, but rest assured the Gate Guardian instantaneously obliterated him as one of the bullets went through the 1-kilometer threshold. We attempted as much repair as we could on the wound.”

A guard comes through the door, and comes to release my restraints. One by one I’m set free, and the director says, “We put those on because you were thrashing around quite violently in your sleep.

“You have been classified as an SCP, and you’ll be cleaned and prepared for containment at this other site along with Geoff.”

I lunge at him, but the guard grabs me and holds me back, dragging me along through the door. I stop because I know it’s futile, this guard is roided beyond belief, I doubt I could overpower them. They lead me along through the door and the guard pushes me into a corner and says, “Strip down and you’ll be cleaned.” It’s a woman, a strong one.

She closes the door and turns away for me to get undressed from my hospital gown. I pull off the gown and go to touch something with my missing hand, reminding me it's gone. I step under the shower head and with my other hand, I guess my bad hand now, turn the knob and ice-cold water starts flowing down. No soap, so I just rinse off the leftover dirt on my face and hair. The water suddenly spurts out and stops.

The guard turns around, and I cover myself to be decent. "Put these on," she tosses me a *very* ugly orange jumpsuit with a male undergarment.

After getting dressed I'm pulled along down a hallway and through a set of double doors that lead to prison-like hall full of people in orange jumpsuits with a black logo on the right breast. The garments are very comfortable, though. But we don't stop, she leads me further down, and I walk past a guy with a hole about 2 and a 1/8 inches clear through his forehead, among others.

She leads me through another set of doors and to the left, through another door, but this time, it's an office. The guard pushes me inside and closes the door behind her. "Good afternoon, Agnes-"

"Agnese, with an *easy*," I correct him, "And call me Charlie."

"Of course, take a seat," he says, "I'm going to ask you a series of questions- oh, My name is Doctor Hagnes, I'm a researcher here at this site for the Foundation. I'll ask some questions and all you have to do is answer to the fullest of your abilities and you'll be free to go."

"Whatever, fine," I scoff.



“You’ve been classified as a ‘Safe’ SCP with the anomalous property of being able to dream memories of your dead ancestor Charlie Adamonte. Could you describe the types of things you see when you dream?” he asks me.

“I have night terrors of a silver man. It ranges from destroying cities to bombings,” I explain.

“By the silver man, you mean 0-0-1, the Gate Guardian, or the Torwächter as it’s known in Jermaine?” he asks, “These dreams are variations on the destructions of Londen, Angland, Ledivberg, Jermaine, and the bombing of the Lordov Check-in, yes?”

“Yeah, I guess- I don’t know,” I turn my head, “Why was the Torwächter on fire anyway?”

“Oh, right, you must be confused about the appearance,” he leans back in his chair, “You see, Hister invaded Site 0, he used a nuclear explosive to make 0-0-1 dormant for a small time, and then stole a branch from the tree of good and evil from the gate. When he left, and 0-0-1 woke back up, the gate guardian started walking towards the branch, leaving his sword to guard the grove. When doing this and when not in direct contact with his sword, he loses some divinity and takes the appearance of the ‘silver man’, or so the theory goes.

“Back to *my* questions,” he leans back forward and starts back writing on his papers, “You currently stay awake for as long as possible and take Nevoperin, an illegal market anti-dream drug when you do sleep, yes?”

“Yes, I’m awake 3 to 5 days at a time,” I say.

“Now, I’ll explain to you that this type of anomalous property is fairly common amongst descendants of people who suffer traumatic experiences involving certain types of SCPs,” he goes on, “In fact, it’s so well studied here at the Foundation, that we have a 95% success rate of neutralizing such properties-”

I jump up and slam my hand on the table, but I slip on my left nub and fall to the ground, smacking my head on the desk, “You can take this away from me?”

“Yes, it’s possible,” he says, looking over the desk to me on the ground, holding my missing arm. I climb back up to the chair and situate myself in it. “In fact, we can do it today, we prepared for this while you were asleep.

“A few more questions,” he starts again, “Who hired you to break into Site 0?”

“The code for slinging is don’t ask, so I don’t know the buyer,” I say, cradling my nub.

“Why were you traveling with a drone from the Anderson Robotics Company?”

“I wasn’t,” I say.

“He’s listed as Geoff,” he goes further, “He’s a highly advanced drone, we’re still working through studying him.”

“He was assigned for extra protection, he’s the best in the business,” I tell him, “He’s a sharpshooter.”

“He’s very high tech, so I’m not surprised,” he writes some stuff down on the paper, “Last question, which is more of a statement. This one time because you’re an SCP yourself, any more infractions against the Foundation, you *will* be tried for your crimes against the SCP Foundation, do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” I say, *perhaps it’s time*.

“Good,” he says to me, standing and calling back out through the door, “Take her to the memory chamber!”

What happened after that, I don’t remember. I woke up in my own clothes and all my stuff at a train station with nothing but a ticket to my hometown. The train pulled up and I got inside. The ride was nice, I don’t think I’ve ever been on a train. It gave me time to think about how I got to where I am today. I made an early stop and went to Mr. Masson and told him everything I learned, and to tell him I’m done with this job.

“You sure?” he asks, “I’ll pay you for your work, of course.”

I let out a laugh, “I’m going to spend it all getting a good hand.”

“Well, consider it done, I’ll have it transferred tonight,” he remarks, “You haven’t been sleeping again. If what you said is true, then you should have no problem now.”

“I’m afraid,” I say, “You think you can find me a real job?”

“Whaddya’ mean a *real* job?” he snarks.

"I don't know," I lean on the wall, "I'm not working at a laundromat, though. By the way, I haven't seen that girl around, isn't it break time?"

"I transferred her to Betty's," he says. *Betty's*, I think, I recognize that name. "The IRS was getting too close to me, and I didn't want to get her involved."

"Sign me up, I'm sick of slinging."

"Consider it done," he smiles.

"Has Cynthia checked in?" I ask, "Her number changed."

"That question is against code, but I guess you're done with that now," he says, "As far as I know she's in the city, try checking her apartment."

"Aye, aye," I say, popping off the wall, and leaving. Maybe I'll stop by Freemont and hit up that Chinese truck.



“Welcome to Betty’s,” I say to the customer walking through the door. I remembered that Betty’s was the name of the restaurant Charlie worked at. It’s a large franchise in the 1950s and made a resurgence in European in the 2050s. The uniform is ugly and clashes with my good eye and good hand; metallic black and red and white stripes don’t mix.

Cynthia agreed to let me move in as a roommate as long as I pay half the rent. I finally collapsed from exhaustion on the new couch I bought her that doubles as my bed. I took a chance and decided not to take the anti-dream, and for the first time I can ever remember, I had a good dream. It was about Charlie and Charles’ first son, Charles the second, and his first day at school after the war ended. For once in my dreams, I felt at peace.

I take the customer’s order, and they go sit down and wait. That teenager that Masson employs, she walks up and sees me struggling with the register. “Ya’know I’ve heard things about you,” she remarks.

I laugh, “Like what?”

“I know you work under the table for Mr. Masson. /bet you’ve seen some pretty cool things!”

“Not anymore, but you don’t know the half of it,” she points to the button I have to press, “Maybe I’ll tell you about it sometime.” Another customer walks in and I say, “Welcome to Betty’s,” and I take their order.



# Notes on 0-0-1 The Gate Guardian



“0-0-1 The Gate Guardian: Future” is based on “SCP-001 Proposal  
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